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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of simplification in second language instruction. It argues that although simplification is a necessary process in coping with the conceptual and experiential chaos of the classroom, it is a potentially dangerous process that risks creating categories that become too insensitive to cope with changing audiences and changing conceptual needs. Simplification in the classroom involves selection, coherence, and adaptation to the particular audience by the instructor. Processes of making general statement, of fixing and formalizing, and ultimately of stressing particular features for particular effects are inherent in the simplification process, but should not degenerate into insensitive stereotyping and caricature. Teachers need to understand the nature of the simplifications they are making and beware of their pitfalls. (MDM)

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SIMPLIFICATION IN PEDAGOGY

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SIMPLIFICATION IN PEDAGOGY

Christopher Brumfit

Broad Issues

In this paper I want to take a broad approach to the issue of simplification. I shall argue that it is a necessary process in coping with the conceptual and experiential chaos that surrounds us, but it is a potentially dangerous process too, because it risks creating categories that rapidly become too insensitive to cope with changing audiences and changing conceptual needs. Developing a capacity to distinguish between necessary simplification and necessary problematisation of accepted categories is an important aim for education.

Linguistically and conceptually, this paper is an exercise in simplification. From the range of possible approaches I am selecting a limited number which are most appropriate for my argument, ordering them in a way that will enable the reader to make sense of what I have to say as easily as possible, and expressing them in language which will be as accessible as possible to my presumed readership. And I am entitled to assume that anyone else whose work I read will have taken it through a similar process. These activities are built into the co-operative principle, and derive directly from our assumptions about the need to communicate, to persuade, to clarify and to convert.

If we look at basic manuals for teaching, we find that very similar processes are advised. A popular research-based book on "Classroom Teaching Skills", for example, includes a classification for "explanation" which mentions inter alia a series of planning strategies:

> Analyse topic into main parts, or "keys"
> Establish links between parts
> Determine rules (if any) involved
> Specify kind(s) of explanation required
> Adapt plan according to learner characteristics
>
> (Brown & Armstrong, 1984: 123).

At least four of these may be related to general discussion of the notion of simplification. The concept of "main parts" involves a selection and classification of significant elements, a highlighting of sub-components that organises the stream

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of experience into socially constructed categories for easier comprehension. The establishment of "links" similarly attempts to reintegrate the separated elements with a clearly identified set of connecting categories, while the determination of "rules" is an attempt to impose a helpful pattern on experience. The last two elements are less obviously simplification strategies in their own right, but they shift attention from the topic to the form of presentation. The specification of the kind of explanation is perhaps a meta-activity for the teacher - a classification as a device for adopting a communication strategy. But the adaptation of the plan according to learner characteristics reflects the relationship between choices about the code and the nature of the addressee; what is being identified is a discourse strategy. (It is also of course a strategy aimed at a simplified "learner", for teachers typically address groups, not individuals, and every plan, even for an individualised classroom, presumes one or more generalised "typical learners".

Although these categories do not derive from a discussion of "simplification", there is a clear relationship between one of the central activities of teaching and the concept of simplification as described by linguists. The main purpose of this paper is to ask whether such a powerful concept as simplification deserves its special status, or whether in practice it is simply another way of referring to fundamental communication - or even thinking strategies.

Linguists and Simplicity

There are three major ideas underlying the explanation strategies isolated above. First there is the principle of selection, second that of coherence by creating "links" and "rules", and third that of adaptation to audience. Examples that may be taken from the history of applied linguistics relate to these quite closely.

To take only one example, the structure of artificial languages may reflect each of the first two characteristics, but they also deliberately sacrifice the third in the desire to avoid the cultural closeness that some supporters of world peace feel inhibits understanding. Applied linguists (whether professionals like Quirk, 1982: 37-53, or amateurs like Gowers, 1954) who concern themselves with simplification movements, will use selection procedures that depend on a view of internal linguistic coherence with the minimal number of usable elements. They thus willingly sacrifice adaptability to varied audiences in the interests of broader communication. In essence they are bidding for a large scale homogeneous audience, whether it is an appeal to "the plain man" or to "international English-users". The fact that these concepts are a simplification, or a stereotyping based on many different individuals, is precisely what makes some commentators uncertain

about their claims (see the debate between Kachru and Quirk in recent issues of English Today). Similar points may be made about classroom second language development (Ellis, 1984: 60-61), or children's L2 acquisition (Fillmore, 1979: 211). But these strategies, while universal, have immense importance when there are asymmetrical power relations, as in teaching.

Simplification as a Teaching Strategy

There is a 'lexical set' that is rarely seen as coherent, but which is of immense importance in teaching. It includes the verbs simplify, generalise, stereotype, and caricature. The first two appear together in the same section of a recent lexicon (McArthur, 1981, section N63), but caricature there is linked with features like "mockery", and stereotype does not appear at all.

If we summarise relevant Advanced Learner's Dictionary definitions of these, in the same order, we see the progression:

1. make easily understood, not causing trouble
2. make a general statement
3. fix, formalise or standardise
4. make an imitation, stressing certain features.

Processes of making general statements, of fixing and formalising, and ultimately of stressing particular features for particular effects are inherent in the simplification process, but they also have inherent risks.

Thus simplification results in a reliance on generalisation, generalisation can easily degenerate into stereotyping, and insensitive stereotyping rapidly becomes caricature, with associated implications of mockery that are offensive to victims.

The tension for the teacher is between quantity and quality. A key feature of linguistic simplification is reduction in quantity, of sentence length, of vocabulary size, of phonemic range (Ferguson, 1977). But this principle cannot be achieved without qualitative decisions being made about the generalisability of particular items. We reduce to the most salient (or functionally generalisable) elements in the discourse; otherwise we lose the overall structure and the discourse becomes incoherent. Thus making a simple statement means acting on generalisations. Linguistically, these may well become stereotyped, so that the generalised features are adopted regardless of the particular referent (so all Africans are "+ black", and all nurses in British society are "+ female" for many English

speakers). When ideologically convenient, such stereotypes become conventional caricatures, so that "Carry On..." films can portray nurses as inherently female and sexy, and early twentieth century children's comics could portray Africans as inherently black, different and therefore sinister. Only after substantial ideological shifts do these caricatures give way to emphasis on either what is shared with the reader (Africans or nurses are people like members of other groups - the readers of the text), or what is distinctive about individual members, or separate sub-groups, of the group being generalised about (some Africans are white; some nurses are male).

This combination of factors is a key point. Generalisations affecting people are made about outgroups; they have a distancing effect. "The British are Christians" is a simplification because non-Christian Britains feel ignored, but as a generalisation from the perspective of Iran or India it has some value. The life-style and assumptions of the British are undoubtedly Christian rather than Islamic or Hindu. We live by accepting generalisations as simplifications precisely because complexifications are inefficient until we are deeply embedded in the group being generalised about. "The British are Christians" is not a useful comment in Southampton, but may be in Meshed or Madras.

Thus processes of simplification, whether linguistic, discoursal, or conceptual, involve tacit or explicit judgements about the salience of particular features in relation to the purpose of the discourse, which in turn is responsive to the nature of the audience being addressed. We might go further, and argue that we only establish coherence of viewpoint by creating saliences and debating their appropriateness. The debate about the canon in contemporary literary theory is partly about salience - which are the "key", "emblematic", "resonant" texts for today, which encapsulate greater value for our current world view? Whether Ulysses, Tristram Shandy, or Come Dancing by Victor Sylvester is your choice (to cite various suggestions from a recent TLS debate, January 1992) depends on a view of which generalises most usefully to other matters that concern you.

What I am arguing, then, is that simplification is a process that enables us to concentrate on what is currently important and to ignore what is currently irrelevant. It prevents clutter in the mind, but risks introducing irrelevant clutter of its own. The reason for this is that generalisations are always contextually justified, and when contexts change the justification changes or disappears. Yesterday's generalisations become today's stereotypes and tomorrow's caricatures. Our capacity to process and select concepts becomes dysfunctional if it is not accompanied by a capacity to recognise changing contexts, and serious thinking requires a constant internal debate between the demands of quantity and quality.

Implications for Practice

I have suggested that the simplification debate, which might at first sight seem to be a technical one for linguists, is bound up with larger issues of comprehension and communication. Teachers of course operate with great power in both these spheres. The centrality of explanation involves them in frequent (and usually implicit) decision-making about salience and generalisability, both conceptually and linguistically. But they are also, as a profession, unusually exposed to cultural variation. Teachers, unusually, operate with many large groups of people in the course of a single working day. Their role is to communicate effectively, and to cause effective communication within these groups - and each group has to be generalised about in planning, in execution of the lesson, in making judgements for assessment purposes, and in dealing with the considerable affective demands that insecure learners make on their teachers. It is little surprise that a process of simplification and routinisation is important in general teacher thinking (see Calderhead, 1988) or in language teachers' methodological practice (Mitchell and Johnstone, 1986).

I have argued elsewhere that effective discussion of the practice of teaching requires methodological constructs that are intermediate between scientific studies that are independent of teaching and those that are embedded in classroom practice (Brumfit, 1987). I would wish to propose that an important conceptual tension for teacher education is the one explored in this paper, between simplification as quantitative reduction (or economy) and simplification as qualitative reduction (or insensitivity to audience). The latter formulation may seem a surprising way of looking at the problem, but it should be clear from the argument so far that the quality of conceptualisation is dependent on the cultural base from which the reader, listener or learner is operating. Insofar as teachers are necessarily transmitters of culture, awareness of the relationship between the conceptual frameworks of learners and those underlying all generalisations, simplifications, and explanations provided by the teaching process will be crucial. We have to simplify, both in code and in content - otherwise we cannot communicate.

But all simplification betrays somebody; no simplification betrays everybody. Teachers have to resolve this paradox in their professional practice.

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